Tamil language

Tamil (/ˈtæmɪl/; தமிழ் *Tamiḻ* [tamiɻ], pronunciation) is a Dravidian language predominantly spoken by the Tamil people of India and Sri Lanka, and by the Tamil diaspora and Sri Lankan Muslims. Tamil is an official language in three countries: India, Sri Lanka and Singapore.[11][12] In India, it is the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry. Furthermore, Tamil is used as one of the languages of education in Malaysia, along with English, Malay and Mandarin.[13][14] Tamil is spoken by significant minorities in the four other South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and the Union Territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It is one of the 22 scheduled languages of India.

Tamil is one of the longest-surviving classical languages in the world.[15][16] A. K. Ramanujan described it as "the only language of contemporary India which is recognizably continuous with a classical past."[17] The variety and quality of classical Tamil literature has led to it being described as "one of the great classical traditions and literatures of the world".[18]

A recorded Tamil literature has been documented for over 2000 years.[19] The earliest period of Tamil literature, Sangam literature, is dated from ca. 300 BC – AD 300.[20][21] It has the oldest extant literature among Dravidian languages.[15] The earliest epigraphic records found on rock edicts and 'hero stones' date from around the 3rd century BC.[22][23] More than 55% of the epigraphical inscriptions (about 55,000) found by the Archaeological Survey of India are in the Tamil language.[24] Tamil language inscriptions written in Brahmi script have been discovered in Sri Lanka and on trade goods in Thailand and Egypt.[25][26] The two earliest manuscripts from India,[27][28] acknowledged and registered by the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 1997 and 2005, were written in Tamil.[29]

In 1578, Portuguese Christian missionaries published a Tamil prayer book in old Tamil script named *Thambiran Vanakkam*, thus making Tamil the first

Tamil	
தமிழ் *Tamiḻ*	
தமிழ்	
Pronunciation	[tamiɻ]; pronunciation
Native to	India Sri Lanka
Ethnicity	Tamil people
Native speakers	75 million (2011–2015)[1][2] L2 speakers: 6 million[1]
Language family	Dravidian ▪ Southern ▪ Tamil–Kannada ▪ Tamil–Kodagu ▪ Tamil–Malayalam ▪ Tamil languages ▪ **Tamil**
Early forms	Old Tamil ▪ Middle Tamil
Writing system	Tamil (Brahmic) Tamil-Brahmi (historical) Grantha (historical) Vatteluttu (historical) Pallava (historical) Kolezhuthu (historical) Arwi (Abjad) Tamil Braille (Bharati) Latin script (informal)
Signed forms	Signed Tamil
Official status	
Official language in	Sri Lanka Singapore India: ▪ Tamil Nadu[3]

Indian language to be printed and published.[30] The *Tamil Lexicon*, published by the University of Madras, was one of the earliest dictionaries published in the Indian languages.[31] According to a 2001 survey, there were 1,863 newspapers published in Tamil, of which 353 were dailies.[32]

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	▪ Puducherry[4] **Organizations** ASEAN[5]
Recognised minority language in	Malaysia[6] Mauritius[7] South Africa[8]
Language codes	
ISO 639-1	`ta (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?iso_639_1=ta)`
ISO 639-2	`tam (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=437)`
ISO 639-3	Either: `tam` – Modern Tamil `oty` – Old Tamil
Linguist List	`oty (http://multitree.org/codes/oty)` Old Tamil
Glottolog	`tami1289 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/tami1289)` Modern Tamil[9] `oldt1248 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/oldt1248)` Old Tamil[10]
Linguasphere	`49-EBE-a`

Classification

Tamil belongs to the southern branch of the Dravidian languages, a family of around 26 languages native to the Indian subcontinent.[33] It is also classified as being part of a Tamil language family that, alongside Tamil proper, includes the languages of about 35 ethno-linguistic groups[34] such as the Irula and Yerukula languages (see SIL Ethnologue).

The closest major relative of Tamil is Malayalam; the two began diverging around the 9th century AD.[35] Although many of the differences between Tamil and Malayalam demonstrate a pre-historic split of the western dialect,[36] the process of separation into a distinct language, Malayalam, was not completed until sometime in the 13th or 14th century.[37]

History

According to linguists like Bhadriraju Krishnamurti, Tamil, as a Dravidian language, descends from Proto-Dravidian, a proto-language. Linguistic reconstruction suggests that Proto-Dravidian was spoken around the third millennium BC, possibly in the region around the lower Godavari river basin in peninsular India. The material evidence suggests that the speakers of Proto-Dravidian were of the culture associated with the Neolithic complexes of South India.[38] The earliest epigraphic attestations of Tamil are generally taken to have been written from the 2nd century BC.[39]

Tamil inscriptions on a pillar in a large temple

Among Indian languages, Tamil has the most ancient non-Sanskritic Indian literature.[40] Scholars categorise the attested history of the language into three periods: Old Tamil (300 BC–AD 700), Middle Tamil (700–1600) and Modern Tamil (1600–present).[41] In November 2007, an excavation at Quseir-al-Qadim revealed Egyptian pottery dating back to first century BC with ancient Tamil Brahmi inscriptions.[25] John Guy states that Tamil was the lingua franca for early maritime traders from India.[42]

Legend

According to Hindu legend, Tamil or in personification form Tamil Thāi (Mother Tamil) was created by Lord Shiva. Murugan, revered as the Tamil God, along with sage Agastya, brought it to the people.[47]

Mangulam Tamil Brahmi inscription in Mangulam, Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, dated to Tamil Sangam period (c. 400 BC to c. 200 AD)

Etymology

The earliest extant Tamil literary works and their commentaries celebrate the Pandiyan Kings for the organization of long-termed Tamil Sangams, which researched, developed and made amendments in Tamil language. Even though the name of the language which was developed by these Tamil Sangams is mentioned as Tamil, the period when the name "Tamil" came to be applied to the language is unclear, as is the precise etymology of the name. The earliest attested use of the name is found in Tholkappiyam, which is dated as early as late 2nd century BC.[48][49]Southworth suggests that the name comes from *tam-mi1* > *tam-i1* "self-speak", or "one's own speech".[50] Kamil Zvelebil suggests

an etymology of *tam-iḻ*, with *tam* meaning "self" or "one's self", and "-*iḻ*" having the connotation of "unfolding sound". Alternatively, he suggests a derivation of *tamiḻ* < *tam-iḻ* < **tav-iḻ* < **tak-iḻ*, meaning in origin "the proper process (of speaking)".[51]

The Tamil Lexicon of University of Madras defines the word "Tamil" as "sweetness".[52] S. V. Subramanian suggests the meaning "sweet sound", from *tam* — "sweet" and *il* — "sound".[53]

Explanation for Mangulam Tamil Brahmi inscription in Mangulam, Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, dated to Tamil Sangam period (c. 400 BC to c. 200 AD)

Old Tamil

Old Tamil is the period of the Tamil language spanning the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD. The earliest records in Old Tamil are short inscriptions from between the 3rd and 2nd century BC in caves and on pottery. These inscriptions are written in a variant of the Brahmi script called Tamil-Brahmi.[54] The earliest long text in Old Tamil is the *Tolkāppiyam*, an early work on Tamil grammar and poetics, whose oldest layers could be as old as the late 2nd century BC.[41][55] Many literary works in Old Tamil have also survived. These include a corpus of 2,381 poems collectively known as Sangam literature. These poems are usually dated to between the 1st century BC and 5th century AD.[41][56]

Tamil Brahmi script in the reverse side of the bilingual silver coin of king Vashishtiputra Sātakarni (c. AD 160) of Deccan. **Rev:** Ujjain/Sātavāhana symbol, crescented six-arch chaitya hill and river with Tamil Brahmi script[43][44][45][46] **Obv:** Bust of king; Prakrit legend in the Brahmi script

Middle Tamil

The evolution of Old Tamil into Middle Tamil, which is generally taken to have been completed by the 8th century,[41] was characterised by a number of phonological and grammatical changes. In phonological terms, the most important shifts were the virtual disappearance of the aytam (ஃ), an old phoneme,[57] the coalescence of the alveolar and dental nasals,[58] and the transformation of the alveolar plosive into a rhotic.[59] In grammar, the most important change was the emergence of the present tense. The present tense evolved out of the verb *kil* (கில்), meaning "to be possible" or "to befall". In Old Tamil, this verb was used as an aspect marker to indicate that an action was micro-durative, non-sustained or non-lasting, usually in combination with a time marker such as *ṉ* (ன்). In Middle Tamil, this usage evolved into a present tense marker – *kiṉṟa* (கின்ற) – which combined the old aspect and time markers.[60]

Modern Tamil

The Nannul remains the standard normative grammar for modern literary Tamil, which therefore continues to be based on Middle Tamil of the 13th century rather than on Modern Tamil.[61] Colloquial spoken Tamil, in contrast, shows a number of changes. The negative conjugation of verbs, for example, has fallen out of use in Modern Tamil[62] – instead, negation is expressed either morphologically or syntactically.[63] Modern spoken Tamil also shows a number of sound changes, in particular, a tendency to lower high vowels in initial and medial positions,[64] and the disappearance of vowels between plosives and between a plosive and rhotic.[65]

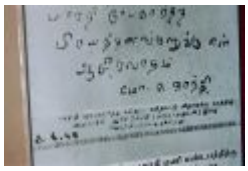
Contact with European languages affected written and spoken Tamil. Changes in written Tamil include the use of European-style punctuation and the use of consonant clusters that were not permitted in Middle Tamil. The syntax of written Tamil has also changed, with the introduction of new aspectual auxiliaries and more complex sentence structures, and with the emergence of a more rigid word order that resembles the syntactic argument structure of English.[66] Simultaneously, a strong strain of linguistic purism emerged in the early 20th century, culminating in the Pure Tamil Movement which called for removal of all Sanskritic elements from Tamil.[67] It received some support from Dravidian parties.[68] This led to the replacement of a significant number of Sanskrit loanwords by Tamil equivalents, though many others remain.[69]

Tamil inscriptions in Vatteluttu script in stone during Chola period c.1000 AD at Brahadeeswara temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

Geographic distribution

Tamil is the primary language of the majority of the people residing in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, (in India) and in Northern Province, Eastern Province (Sri Lanka). The language is spoken among small minority groups in other states of India which include Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra and in certain regions of Sri Lanka such as Colombo and the hill country. Tamil or dialects of it were used widely in the state of Kerala as the major language of administration, literature and common usage until the 12th century AD. Tamil was also used widely in inscriptions found in southern Andhra Pradesh districts of Chittoor and Nellore until the 12th century AD.[70] Tamil was used for inscriptions from the 10th through 14th centuries in southern Karnataka districts such as Kolar, Mysore, Mandya and Bangalore.[71]

There are currently sizeable Tamil-speaking populations descended from colonial-era migrants in Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Mauritius, South Africa, Indonesia,[72] Thailand,[73] Burma, and Vietnam. A large community of Pakistani Tamils speakers exists in Karachi, Pakistan, which includes Tamil-speaking Hindus[74][75] as well as Christians and Muslims – including some Tamil-speaking Muslim refugees from Sri Lanka.[76] There are about 100 Tamil Hindu families in Madrasi Para colony in Karachi .They speak impeccable Tamil along with Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi.[77] Many in Réunion, Guyana, Fiji, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago have Tamil origins,[78] but only a small number speak the language. In Reunion where the Tamil language was forbidden to be learnt and used in public space by France it is now being relearnt by students and adults.[79] Tamil is also spoken by migrants from Sri Lanka and India in Canada, the United States (especially New Jersey and New York City), Australia, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and many other European and Middle Eastern countries.



Mahatma Gandhi's written wishes in Tamil for Subramanya Bharathy

Multilingual signs with Tamil in Sri Lanka (tsunami early warning tower)

Nameboard with Tamil at Koneswaram temple at Thirukonamalai, Sri Lanka.

A multilingual danger sign in Singapore with Tamil writing

Mauritius currency note with Tamil 'இருநூறு ரூபாய்' (200 rupee) written in the note with the man wearing eyeglasses, written next to him.

A restaurant in Edison, New Jersey, near New York City, with signage in Tamil and English translation

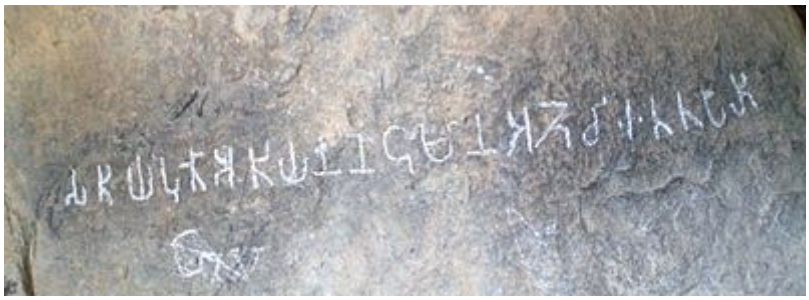
Legal status

Tamil is the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and one of the 22 languages under schedule 8 of the constitution of India. It is one of the official languages of the union territories of Puducherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.[80][81] Tamil is also one of the official languages of Singapore. Tamil is one of the official and national languages of Sri Lanka, along with Sinhala.[11] It was once given nominal official status in the Indian state of Haryana, purportedly as a rebuff to Punjab, though there was no attested Tamil-speaking population in the state, and was later replaced by Punjabi, in 2010.[82] In Malaysia, 543 primary education government schools are available fully in Tamil medium.[83] The establishment of Tamil medium schools has been in process in Myanmar to provide education completely in Tamil language by the Tamils who settled there 200 years ago.[84] Tamil language is available as a course in some local school boards and major universities in Canada and the month of January has been declared "Tamil Heritage Month" by the Parliament of Canada.[85][86] Tamil enjoys a special status of protection under Article 6(b), Chapter 1 of the Constitution of South Africa and is taught as a subject in schools in KwaZulu-Natal province.[87][88] Recently, it has been rolled out as a subject of study in schools in the French overseas department of Réunion.[89]

In addition, with the creation in October 2004 of a legal status for classical languages by the Government of India and following a political campaign supported by several Tamil associations,[90][91] Tamil became the first legally recognised Classical language of India. The recognition was announced by the contemporaneous President of India, Abdul Kalam, in a joint sitting of both houses of the Indian Parliament on 6 June 2004.[92][93][94]

Dialects

Region-specific variations



Jambai Tamil Brahmi inscription near Tirukkoyilur in Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu dated to the early Tamil Sangam age (c. 400 BC).

The socio-linguistic situation of Tamil is characterised by diglossia: there are two separate registers varying by socioeconomic status, a high register and a low one.[95][96] Tamil dialects are primarily differentiated from each other by the fact that they have undergone different phonological changes and sound shifts in evolving from Old Tamil. For example, the word for "here"—*iṅku* in *Centamil* (the classic variety)—has evolved into *iṅkū* in the Kongu dialect of Coimbatore, *inga* in the dialect of Thanjavur, and *iṅkai* in some dialects of Sri Lanka. Old Tamil's *iṅkaṇ* (where *kaṇ* means place) is the source of *iṅkane* in the dialect of Tirunelveli, Old Tamil *iṅkaṭṭu* is the source of *iṅkuṭṭu* in the dialect of Madurai, and *iṅkaṭe* in some northern dialects. Even now, in the Coimbatore area, it is common to hear "*akkaṭṭa*" meaning "that place". Although Tamil dialects do not differ significantly in their vocabulary, there are a few exceptions. The dialects spoken in Sri Lanka retain many words and grammatical forms that are not in everyday use in India,[41][97] and use many other words slightly differently.[98] Tamil dialects include Central Tamil dialect, Kongu Tamil, Madras Bashai, Madurai Tamil, Nellai Tamil, Kumari tamil in India and Batticaloa Tamil dialect, Jaffna Tamil dialect, Negombo Tamil dialect in Sri Lanka. Sankethi dialect in Karnataka has been heavily influenced by Kannada.

Loanword variations

The dialect of the district of Palakkad in Kerala has many Malayalam loanwords, has been influenced by Malayalam's syntax, and has a distinctive Malayalam accent. Similarly, Tamil spoken in Kanyakumari District has more unique words and phonetic style than Tamil spoken at other parts of Tamil Nadu. The words and phonetics are so different that a person from Kanyakumari district is easily identifiable by their spoken Tamil. Hebbar and Mandyam dialects, spoken by groups of Tamil Vaishnavites who migrated to Karnataka in the 11th century, retain many features of the *Vaishnava paribasai*, a special form of Tamil developed in the 9th and 10th centuries that reflect Vaishnavite religious and spiritual values.[99] Several castes have their own sociolects which most members of that caste traditionally used regardless of where they come from. It is often possible to identify a person's caste by their speech.[100] Tamil in Sri Lanka incorporates loan words from Portuguese, Dutch, and English.

Spoken and literary variants

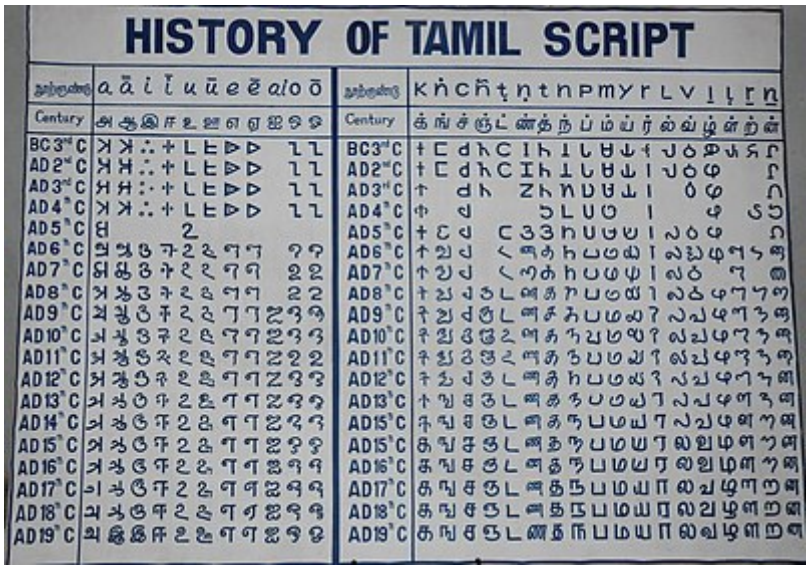
In addition to its dialects, Tamil exhibits different forms: a classical literary style modelled on the ancient language (*sankattami*), a modern literary and formal style (*centami*), and a modern colloquial form (*koṭuntami*). These styles shade into each other, forming a stylistic continuum. For example, it is possible

to write *centamiḻ* with a vocabulary drawn from *caṅkattamiḻ*, or to use forms associated with one of the other variants while speaking *koṭuntamiḻ*.[101]

In modern times, *centamiḻ* is generally used in formal writing and speech. For instance, it is the language of textbooks, of much of Tamil literature and of public speaking and debate. In recent times, however, *koṭuntamiḻ* has been making inroads into areas that have traditionally been considered the province of *centamiḻ*. Most contemporary cinema, theatre and popular entertainment on television and radio, for example, is in *koṭuntamiḻ*, and many politicians use it to bring themselves closer to their audience. The increasing use of *koṭuntamiḻ* in modern times has led to the emergence of unofficial 'standard' spoken dialects. In India, the 'standard' *koṭuntamiḻ*, rather than on any one dialect,[102] but has been significantly influenced by the dialects of Thanjavur and Madurai. In Sri Lanka, the standard is based on the dialect of Jaffna.

Writing system

After Tamil Brahmi fell out of use, Tamil was written using a script called *vaṭṭeḻuttu* amongst others such as Grantha and Pallava. The current Tamil script consists of 12 vowels, 18 consonants and one special character, the *āytam*. The vowels and consonants combine to form 216 compound characters, giving a total of 247 characters (12 + 18 + 1 + (12 x 18)). All consonants have an inherent vowel *a*, as with other Indic scripts. This inherent vowel is removed by adding a tittle called a *puḷḷi*, to the consonantal sign. For example, னா is *ṉa* (with the inherent *a*) and ன் is *ṉ* (without a vowel). Many Indic scripts have a similar sign, generically called virama, but the Tamil script is somewhat different in that it nearly always uses a visible *puḷḷi* to indicate a 'dead consonant' (a consonant without a vowel). In other Indic scripts, it is generally preferred to use a ligature or a half form to write a syllable or a cluster containing a dead consonant, although writing it with a visible virama is also possible. The Tamil script does not differentiate voiced and unvoiced plosives. Instead, plosives are articulated with voice depending on their position in a word, in accordance with the rules of Tamil phonology.



Historical evolution of Tamil writing from the earlier Tamil Brahmi near the top to the current Tamil script at bottom.

Thirukkural palm leaf manuscript.

In addition to the standard characters, six characters taken from the Grantha script, which was used in the Tamil region to write Sanskrit, are sometimes used to represent sounds not native to Tamil, that is, words adopted from Sanskrit, Prakrit and other languages. The traditional system prescribed by classical grammars for writing loan-words, which involves respelling them in accordance with Tamil phonology, remains, but is not always consistently applied.[103] ISO 15919 is an international standard for the transliteration of Tamil

and other Indic scripts into Latin characters. It uses diacritics to map the much larger set of Brahmic consonants and vowels to the Latin script. Tamil can be transliterated into English by using ISO 15919, since English language uses the Latin script for writing.

Numerals and symbols

Apart from the usual numerals, Tamil has numerals for 10, 100 and 1000. Symbols for day, month, year, debit, credit, as above, rupee, and numeral are present as well. Tamil also uses several historical fractional signs.

zero	one	two	three	four	five	six	seven	eight	nine	ten	hundred	thousand
௦	க	உ	ங	ச	ரு	சு	எ	அ	கூ	ய	ஈ	சூ

day	month	year	debit	credit	as above	rupee	numeral
உ	மீ	ஸ்ரீ	பூ	ஸ்வ	ஷை	ரூ	நீ

Phonology

Tamil phonology is characterised by the presence of retroflex consonants and multiple rhotics. Tamil does not distinguish phonologically between voiced and unvoiced consonants; phonetically, voice is assigned depending on a consonant's position in a word.[104] Tamil phonology permits few consonant clusters, which can never be word initial. Native grammarians classify Tamil phonemes into vowels, consonants, and a "secondary character", the āytam.

Vowels

Tamil has five vowel qualities, namely /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/ and /u/. Each may be long or short. There are two diphthongs, /aɪ/ and /aʊ/. Long vowels are about twice as long as short vowels. The diphthongs are usually pronounced about 1.5 times as long as short vowels. Most grammatical texts place them with the long vowels.

	Short			Long		
	Front	Central	Back	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u	iː		uː
	இ		உ	ஈ		ஊ
Mid	e		o	eː		oː
	எ		ஒ	ஏ		ஓ
Open		a		(aɪ̯)	aː	(aʊ̯)
		அ		ஐ	ஆ	ஔ

Consonants

Tamil consonants are presented as hard, soft and medial in some grammars which roughly corresponds to plosives, nasals and approximants. Unlike most Indian languages, Tamil does not distinguish aspirated and unaspirated consonants. In addition, the voicing of plosives is governed by strict rules in *centamiḻ*. Plosives are unvoiced if they occur word-initially or doubled. Elsewhere they are voiced, with a few becoming fricatives intervocalically, which means that voicing is not a phonological trait for plosives. Nasals and approximants are always voiced.[105]

Tamil is characterised by its use of more than one type of coronal consonants: like many of the other languages of India, it contains a series of retroflex consonants. Notably, the Tamil retroflex series includes the retroflex approximant /ɻ/ (ழ) (example Tami**l**; often transcribed 'zh'), which is rare in the Indo-Aryan languages. Among the other Dravidian languages, the retroflex approximant also occurs in Malayalam (for example in 'Ko**zh**ikode'), disappeared from spoken Kannada around 1000 AD (although the character is still written, and exists in Unicode, ೞ as in ಕೊೞಿ), and was never present in Telugu. In many dialects of colloquial Tamil, this consonant is seen as disappearing and shifting to the alveolar lateral approximant /l/.[106] Dental and alveolar consonants also historically contrasted with each other, a typically Dravidian trait not found in the neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages. While this distinction can still be seen in the written language, it has been largely lost in colloquial spoken Tamil, and even in literary usage the letters ந (dental) and ன (alveolar) may be seen as allophonic.[107] Likewise, the historical alveolar stop has transformed into a trill consonant in many modern dialects.

A chart of the Tamil consonant phonemes in the International Phonetic Alphabet follows:[97]

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar
Plosives	p	t	t̪	ʈ	t͡ɕ	k
	ப	த	ற	ட	ச	க
Nasals	m	n	n̪	ɳ	ɲ	ŋ
	ம	ந	ன	ண	ஞ	ங
Tap				ɽ		
				ர		
Central approximants	ʋ			ɻ	j	
	வ			ழ	ய	
Lateral approximants		l		ɭ		
		ல		ள		

The plosives have voiced allophones after nasals. The sounds /f/ and /ʂ/ are peripheral to the phonology of Tamil, being found only in loanwords and frequently replaced by native sounds. There are well-defined rules for elision in Tamil categorised into classes based on the phoneme which undergoes elision.

Āytam

Classical Tamil had a phoneme called the *āytam*, written as 'ஃ'. Tamil grammarians of the time classified it as a dependent phoneme (or restricted phoneme[108]) (*cārpeḻuttu*), but it is very rare in modern Tamil. The rules of pronunciation given in the *Tolkāppiyam*, a text on the grammar of Classical Tamil, suggest that the *āytam* could have glottalised the sounds it was combined with. It has also been suggested that the *āytam* was

used to represent the voiced implosive (or closing part or the first half) of geminated voiced plosives inside a word.[109] The āytam, in modern Tamil, is also used to convert *p* to *f* when writing English words using the Tamil script.

Grammar

Tamil employs agglutinative grammar, where suffixes are used to mark noun class, number, and case, verb tense and other grammatical categories. Tamil's standard metalinguistic terminology and scholarly vocabulary is itself Tamil, as opposed to the Sanskrit that is standard for most Aryan languages.[110][111]

Much of Tamil grammar is extensively described in the oldest known grammar book for Tamil, the *Tolkāppiyam*. Modern Tamil writing is largely based on the 13th century grammar *Naṉṉūl* which restated and clarified the rules of the *Tolkāppiyam*, with some modifications. Traditional Tamil grammar consists of five parts, namely *eḻuttu*, *sol*, *poruḷ*, *yāppu*, *aṇi*. Of these, the last two are mostly applied in poetry.[112]

Tamil words consist of a lexical root to which one or more affixes are attached. Most Tamil affixes are suffixes. Tamil suffixes can be derivational suffixes, which either change the part of speech of the word or its meaning, or inflectional suffixes, which mark categories such as person, number, mood, tense, etc. There is no absolute limit on the length and extent of agglutination, which can lead to long words with many suffixes, which would require several words or a sentence in English. To give an example, the word *pōkamuṭiyātavarkaḷukkāka* (□□□□□□□□□□□வ□□□□□□□□□□□) means "for the sake of those who cannot go" and consists of the following morphemes:

□□□	முடி	ஆத்	அ	வர்	கள்	உக்கு	ஆக
pōka	*muṭi*	*āt*	*a*	*var*	*kaḷ*	*ukku*	*āka*
go	**accomplish**	**negation (impersonal)**	**participle marker**	**nominalizer *he/she who does***	**plural marker**	**to**	**for**

Morphology

Tamil nouns (and pronouns) are classified into two super-classes (*tiṇai*)—the "rational" (*uyartiṇai*), and the "irrational" (*akaṟiṇai*)—which include a total of five classes (*pāl*, which literally means "gender"). Humans and deities are classified as "rational", and all other nouns (animals, objects, abstract nouns) are classified as irrational. The "rational" nouns and pronouns belong to one of three classes (*pāl*)—masculine singular, feminine singular, and rational plural. The "irrational" nouns and pronouns belong to one of two classes: irrational singular and irrational plural. The *pāl* is often indicated through suffixes. The plural form for rational nouns may be used as an honorific, gender-neutral, singular form.[113]

peyarccol (Name-words)[114]				
uyartiṇai (rational)			***akaṟiṇai*** (irrational)	
āṇpāl Male	*peṇpāl* Female	*palarpāl* Collective	*oṉṟaṇpāl* One	*palaviṉpāl* Many
Example: the Tamil words for "doer"				
ceytavaṉ He who did	*ceytavaḷ* She who did	*ceytavar* They who did	*ceytatu* That which did	*ceytavai* Those ones which did

Suffixes are used to perform the functions of cases or postpositions. Traditional grammarians tried to group the various suffixes into eight cases corresponding to the cases used in Sanskrit. These were the nominative, accusative, dative, sociative, genitive, instrumental, locative, and ablative. Modern grammarians argue that this classification is artificial,[115] and that Tamil usage is best understood if each suffix or combination of suffixes is seen as marking a separate case.[102] Tamil nouns can take one of four prefixes: *i*, *a*, *u*, and *e* which are functionally equivalent to the demonstratives in English. For example, the word *vazhi* (வழி) meaning "way" can take these to produce *ivvazhi* (இவ்வழி) "this way", *avvazhi* (அவ்வழி) "that way", *uvvazhi* (உவ்வழி) "the medial way" and *evvazhi* (எவ்வழி) "which way".

Tamil verbs are also inflected through the use of suffixes. A typical Tamil verb form will have a number of suffixes, which show person, number, mood, tense, and voice.

- Person and number are indicated by suffixing the oblique case of the relevant pronoun. The suffixes to indicate tenses and voice are formed from grammatical particles, which are added to the stem.
- Tamil has two voices. The first indicates that the subject of the sentence *undergoes* or *is the object of* the action named by the verb stem, and the second indicates that the subject of the sentence *directs* the action referred to by the verb stem.
- Tamil has three simple tenses—past, present, and future—indicated by the suffixes, as well as a series of perfects indicated by compound suffixes. Mood is implicit in Tamil, and is normally reflected by the same morphemes which mark tense categories. Tamil verbs also mark evidentiality, through the addition of the hearsay clitic *ām*.[116] Verb inflection is shown below using example *aḻintukkoṇṭiruntēṉ*; (அழிந்துக்கொண்டிருந்தேன்); "(I) was being destroyed".

அழி	*ந்து*	*கொண்டு*	*இரு*	*ந்த்*	*ஏன்*
aḻi	*ntu*	*koṇṭu*	*iru*	*nt*	*ēn*
root destroy	**transitivity marker** intransitive	**aspect marker** continuous	**aspect marker** continuous	**tense marker** past tense	**person marker** first person, singular

Traditional grammars of Tamil do not distinguish between adjectives and adverbs, including both of them under the category *uriccol*, although modern grammarians tend to distinguish between them on morphological and syntactical grounds.[117] Tamil has many ideophones that act as adverbs indicating the way the object in a given state "says" or "sounds".[118]

Tamil does not have articles. Definiteness and indefiniteness are either indicated by special grammatical devices, such as using the number "one" as an indefinite article, or by the context.[119] In the first person plural, Tamil makes a distinction between inclusive pronouns நாம் *nām* (we), நமது *namatu* (our) that include the addressee and exclusive pronouns நாங்கள் *nāṅkaḻ* (we), எமது *ematu* (our) that do not.[119]

Syntax

Tamil is a consistently head-final language. The verb comes at the end of the clause, with a typical word order of subject–object–verb (SOV).[120][121] However, word order in Tamil is also flexible, so that surface permutations of the SOV order are possible with different pragmatic effects. Tamil has postpositions rather than prepositions. Demonstratives and modifiers precede the noun within the noun phrase. Subordinate clauses precede the verb of the matrix clause.

Tamil is a null-subject language. Not all Tamil sentences have subjects, verbs, and objects. It is possible to construct grammatically valid and meaningful sentences which lack one or more of the three. For example, a sentence may only have a verb—such as *muṭintuviṭṭatu* ("completed")—or only a subject and object, without a verb such as *atu eṉ vīṭu* ("That [is] my house"). Tamil does not have a copula (a linking verb equivalent to the word *is*). The word is included in the translations only to convey the meaning more easily.

Vocabulary

The vocabulary of Tamil is mainly Dravidian. A strong sense of linguistic purism is found in Modern Tamil,[122] which opposes the use of foreign loanwords.[123] Nonetheless, a number of words used in classical and modern Tamil are loanwords from the languages of neighbouring groups, or with whom the Tamils had trading links, including Munda (for example, *tavaḷai* "frog" from Munda *tabeg*), Malay (e.g. *cavvarici* "sago" from Malay *sāgu*), Chinese (for example, *campān* "skiff" from Chinese san-pan) and Greek (for example, *ora* from Greek ὥρα). In more modern times, Tamil has imported words from Urdu and Marathi, reflecting groups that have influenced the Tamil area at times, and from neighbouring languages such as Telugu, Kannada, and Sinhala. During the modern period, words have also been adapted from European languages, such as Portuguese, French, and English.[124]

The strongest impact of purism in Tamil has been on words taken from Sanskrit. During its history, Tamil, along with other Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam etc., was influenced by Sanskrit in terms of vocabulary, grammar and literary styles,[125][126][127][128] reflecting the increased trend of Sanskritisation in the Tamil country.[129] Tamil vocabulary never became quite as heavily Sanskritised as that of the other Dravidian languages, and unlike in those languages, it was and remains possible to express complex ideas (including in science, art, religion and law) without the use of Sanskrit loan words.[130][131][132] In addition, Sanskritisation was actively resisted by a number of authors of the late medieval period,[133] culminating in the 20th century in a movement called *taṉit tamiḻ iyakkam* (meaning "pure Tamil movement"), led by Parithimaar Kalaignar and Maraimalai Adigal, which sought to remove the accumulated influence of Sanskrit on Tamil.[134] As a result of this, Tamil in formal documents, literature and public speeches has seen a marked decline in the use Sanskrit loan words in the past few decades,[135] under some estimates having fallen from 40–50% to about 20%.[69] As a result, the Prakrit and Sanskrit loan words used in modern Tamil are, unlike in some other Dravidian languages, restricted mainly to some spiritual terminology and abstract nouns.[136]

In the 20th century, institutions and learned bodies have, with government support, generated technical dictionaries for Tamil containing neologisms and words derived from Tamil roots to replace loan words from English and other languages.[67] As of 2019, the language had a listed vocabulary of over 470,000 unique words, including those from old literary sources. In November 2019, the state government issued an order to add 9,000 new words to the vocabulary.[137]

Influence

Words of Tamil origin occur in other languages. A notable example of a word in worldwide use with Dravidian (not specifically Tamil) etymology is *orange*, via Sanskrit *nāraṅga* from a Dravidian predecessor of Tamil *nartaṅkāy* "fragrant fruit". One suggestion as to the origin of the word *anaconda* is the Tamil *anaikkonda,* "having killed an elephant".[138] Examples in English include *cheroot* (*churuṭṭu* meaning "rolled up"),[139] *mango* (from *māṅgāi*),[139] *mulligatawny* (from *miḻaku taṇṇīr*, "pepper water"), *pariah* (from *paraiyan*), *curry* (from *kari*),[140] *catamaran* (from *kaṭṭu maram*, "bundled logs"),[139] and *congee* (from *kanji* – rice porridge or gruel).[141]

Sample text

The following is a sample text in literary Tamil of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Tamil in the Tamil script:

> **உறுப்புரை 1:** மனிதப் □□□□□□□□□□□ சகலரும் சுதந்திரமாகவே □□□□□□□□□□□□□; அவர்கள் மதிப்பிலும், உரிமைகளிலும் சமமானவர்கள், அவர்கள் நியாயத்தையும் மனச்சாட்சியையும் இயற்பண்பாகப் □□□□□வ□□□□□. அவர்கள் ஒருவருடனொருவர் சகோதர உணர்வுப் □□□□□□□□ நடந்துகொள்ளல் வேண்டும்.।

Romanized Tamil:

> **Uṟuppurai 1:** Maṉitap piṟiviyiṉar cakalarum cutantiramākavē piṟakkiṉṟaṉar; avarkaḷ matippilum, urimaikaḷilum camamāṉavarkaḷ, avarkaḷ niyāyattaiyum maṉaccāṭciyaiyum iyaṟpaṇpākap peṟṟavarkaḷ. Avarkaḷ oruvaruṭaṉoruvar cakōtara uṇarvup pāṅkil naṭantukoḷḷal vēṇṭum.

Tamil in the International Phonetic Alphabet:

> urup:urai onɖrʉ | mənid̪ə piriʋijinər səgələrum suɖəɳɖirəma:gəʋe: pirək:iŋɖranər | əvərgəɭ məd̪ip:ilum uriməigəɭilum səməma:nəʋərgəɭ | əvərgəɭ nija:jat:əijum mənətʧa:ʈʧijəijum ijərpəɳba:gə peʈ̪rəʋərgəɭ | əvərgəɭ oruʋəruɖənoruʋər sago:dərə uɳərʊɨ pa:ŋgil nəɖəɳɖ̪ʉkoɭɭəl ve:ɳɖum |

Gloss:

> **Section 1:** Human beings all-of-them freely are born. They rights-in-and dignities-in-and equal-ones. They law-and conscience-and intrinsically possessed-ones. They among-one-another brotherly feeling share-in act must.

Translation:

> **Article 1:** All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They possess conscience and reason. Therefore, everyone should act in a spirit of brotherhood towards each other.

See also

- List of countries where Tamil is an official language
- List of languages by first written accounts
- Tamil keyboard
- Tamil population by cities
- Tamil population by nation
- Tamil Loanwords in other languages

Footnotes

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